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The Bad Friday:

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S E R M O N

PREACHED IN

THE FIRST CHURCH, WEST ROXBURY,

JUNE 4, 1854;

IT BEING THE SUNDAY AFTER THE

RETURN OF ANTHONY BURNS TO SLAVERY.

BY E. B. WILLSON.

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NOTE.—No one knows better than the writer that the following pages cannot have an extended or a permanent interest. In putting them into the printer's hand, at the suggestion of a friend, he has been influenced by the consideration that every added voice against slavery is a contribution, however small, to the great PUBLIC VOICE which is yet to send forth its omnipotent word decreeing the doom of that overshadowing wrong.

CHARLES J. J. J.
J. J. J. J. J.

S E R M O N .

MATT. XXV. 45: "INASMUCH AS YE DID IT NOT TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE, YE DID IT NOT TO ME."

I HAVE scarcely felt myself equal, my friends, to the duty of meeting you this morning. I have not come to preach. I have written down no carefully meditated words for your instruction. What time I would have given to preparation for this service has been otherwise filled. Neither my mind nor my heart has recovered from the shock which the events of the past few days, and particularly of the day before yesterday, have brought on them. Humiliated, sickened, and oppressed, I have come from witnessing those events. The fresh remembrance of them haunts my waking and my sleeping thoughts. It has been impossible for me sufficiently to withdraw myself from the spell of their terrible power, to review them in all their relations, with a calm, steady eye. But, though I cannot get clear of this horrible nightmare yet, nor shake off wholly the confusion and bewilder-

ment into which I have been thrown by them, the worst of it all is that I *do* see clearly, too clearly, certain facts, which I would fain be convinced are no facts. Alas! no welcome uncertainty obscures them; not the thinnest veil of doubt hides them; eyes that are shut, and eyes that never saw, can see them. And yet I find my whole nature struggling against their credibility, and protesting that they are too appalling to be believed. Even that which is known certainly for fact, a revolting moral nature vainly strives to reject as an impossible turpitude.

Do you ask why I have allowed myself to be a witness of these things, if they were a spectacle so painful? Because I thought it a duty. It seemed to me that I ought to be at least an attending mourner when Liberty was to be consigned to her grave; a silent protester, if no more, when Justice and holy Mercy were to be put to open shame. Moreover, it seemed to me a duty to be present for the purpose of gathering the indelible lessons of that hour. It seemed as if the Lord of eternal righteousness and all-including love, displeased with our cold disregard and forgetfulness of those wronged and suffering millions at a distance, whose bonds we help to make fast, but whose oppressed condition is not much in our minds because it is not much in our sight, — it seemed, I say, as if it might be God's purpose to compel us to see, by bringing its hateful presence to our very doors, what a fearful crime we are assisting

to uphold. I did not feel at liberty to decline the lesson. Still, it was almost too much for human endurance; and once I turned back as from a sight I could not bear. More than one man I met on that Friday morning whose grief and pity ran over at his eyes; more than one whose words choked in his throat, and could not find utterance because of his emotion. Many a pair who met in those crowded streets gripped each other's hand with that long, hard pressure which men use when they cannot speak, and, having seen it in each other's eyes that their mutual feeling was understood, passed on without a word.

It is not my wish, in alluding to these occurrences, to fan a feeling of indignation against those who have been at man-hunting in Boston. That feeling is natural. It has been with me. It may be right. But other feelings than that are now with me uppermost, — yes, and undermost, and most pervading. I am altogether saddened and ashamed. A sense of utter degradation weighs me down. There is at this moment no room in my heart for any other feeling. There have been moments when I could almost adopt the recent language of a noble-hearted friend, who said, "I am ashamed to live!" — so entire is the humiliation I feel.

I am sensible, however, that these transactions may be looked at from one point of view, seen from which, they wear the same humiliating aspect, indeed, but allow the hope, that the humiliation produced by

them may turn out to be that wholesome self-conviction that brings repentance, and so better deeds. These events are making slavery better known to us. Many eyes have been opened by them. We have often been told, that our dislike of slavery was a prejudice; that, if we only knew more of it, if we could but live in the midst of it, our prejudices against it would vanish. Well, as we could not go to it, it has come to us. Apparently, it means that we shall not lack opportunity to make its acquaintance through staying at home. It has been showing us, within these few days, what are its nature and spirit. The teaching must not be lost upon us. Let us study the lesson well.

Its first act is to creep stealthily on its unsuspecting victim with a lie in its mouth, and a false accusation on its tongue. It dare not tell the truth. It is afraid to say openly that it has come to take a man charged with no crime, and make a slave of him. It pretends that he is a criminal, till it has fixed its grasp on him, and hurried him beyond the sight of pitying eyes, and behind walls of stone, and there set men, with hearts of stone, to keep watch and guard over him. Then its disguise is thrown off. It acknowledges then that his only crimes are, that his skin is dark-colored, and that he sought his liberty at the risk of scourging and death.

Your grandsires and mine, not a long time back, broke away from what they called tyranny, though it

was freedom, justice, and indulgence, — it was maternal gentleness, — as compared with the tyranny from which this man fled; and we pay them honor. Our hearts swell, and our words are big, and our demonstrations are high-sounding, when we descant upon their heroism and their virtue. This poor, wretched, outlawed Virginian, pined in a bondage, — one day of which is worse than fifty years of such as our fathers felt, — and so he fled from it, at the peril of life. And what do we? Celebrate his courage with bell-ringsings, and waving banners, and glorifying discourse? No; we pay men to hunt and catch him, and give him to his master, though that master were as cruel as Nero! And no shelter in all this wide land can receive and protect him. There is no altar of refuge, whence he could not be torn. Were he to come, fainting with fear, into this very place and presence, as we were offering our prayers, or singing our praises, or reading those verses in the book of Deuteronomy which I read a few minutes ago,* and here fall at our feet, imploring protection against his oppressor, no man or woman of us all might interpose for his safety, without invoking on his own head the same crushing cruelty which had already stricken him down.

* “Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee. He shall dwell with thee, even among you in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates where it liketh him best. Thou shalt not oppress him.” — Deut. xxiii. 15, 16.

Slavery desires you to know it better, that your prejudices against it may be overcome. And, to show you how groundless are your antipathies, it turns the temple of justice into a slave-pen, and, arming such ruffianly and insolent fellows as it can find willing to engage in its service, sets them to keep its doors, where they insult quiet and orderly citizens, entering for the transaction of their lawful business. It calls on you, or your son, to put on epaulet and plume, to arm yourself, — and there must be no shamming this time, no blank cartridges; the equipment requires deadly bullet, as well as noisy powder, — and then it calls you to go forth and take possession of the peaceful marts, to stop up the avenues of trade, to arrest the regular on-goings of industry, and to make all ready and convenient, that the tyrant and oppressor may drag his human prey through your streets and to his doom, without fear of molestation or hindrance. Lest some overcharged hearts among all those tens of thousands of witnesses should be moved irresistibly by the great tide of an overflowing compassion and an indignant humanity to break in, not to kill or hurt, but to give back to an innocent man that liberty of which he had been robbed, and to which his right is inalienable, — lest some such act of justice and right should be accomplished, I say, slavery requires you, or your young son, may be, whose majority is scarce attained, to march up and down the city-ways with loaded gun, driving the peaceful inhabitants from

their avocations, and arbitrarily closing up the thoroughfares of business.

Slavery wishes itself to be known. God grant it may be ! Let it be known what sort of associates it naturally draws around itself, and what classes of men are arrayed as naturally and necessarily against it. I saw, in my walks through the streets of Boston, on Friday, among those who had come, with mourning hearts, to see the great sacrifice to be laid on Slavery's altar, Christians of various denominations ; venerable, gray-haired clergymen ; men who have labored for years in every humane enterprise ; men of peace, of sobriety, of every virtue ; such men as the State relies on in her crises and emergencies ; such as have repeatedly received tokens of the confidence of the right-minded ; such as have discharged high and varied trusts, with unblemished honor ; such as have ever been foremost in maintaining good laws, and guarding the social order. These, slavery accounted her enemies ; and she was not mistaken : they were.

Now, whom did she call around her as her natural allies ? To whom did she look for support ? I will not speak particularly of the soldiery who were called into service on the occasion, because many went reluctantly, and because perhaps they could not be expected to know better, or to be better, than that moral doctrine so current among the unreflecting, which teaches that a soldier is no more responsible for what he does, in obedience to a superior, than if he were a

billet of wood. Passing by the soldiers, then, most of whom went reluctantly to this "duty," as they called it, who were the *voluntary* supporters of slavery on this occasion? I was told by those who should know, that the persons who offered their services to the United States officer, to keep guard around the captive, lest he should regain his just and inalienable rights, were, some of them, men who had been in our prisons, — men known, notorious even, as men of depraved character, such as do not live by quiet industry, but by preying on society. If there were any doubts of their character, one needed but look into their faces to believe the worst thing said of them. I never saw, in the same number of men, so large a proportion of sinister, savage, and brutish countenances. These are Slavery's fit ministers. They instinctively side with the robber and the oppressor.

Besides those regularly enlisted to carry out the great crime of stealing a man, the awful deed of darkness which was to be consummated brought out many of congenial and kindred mind to witness and encourage it. Men with the red eyes of drunkenness, and men with profane oaths on their lips, were seen about the streets, cheering their vile confederates more immediately implicated in the deed of shame; — yes, such were to be seen, grouped and shouting their applause, about those very streets from which sober, respectable, and Christian citizens had just before been driven like sheep. I am not drawing a picture from imagination,

nor bringing you street rumors. I am telling chiefly what I saw and heard at only one point of observation.

Does the character of slavery need farther illustration? See how the noble-hearted counsellor, who came forward to render aid to the friendless slave, was assaulted in his homeward walk, and not murdered only because the blow was not so skilfully dealt as the striker probably meant it should be. Was the assassin, do you suppose, a friend or an enemy of those who hunt slaves?

Even intelligent persons have spoken of the late occurrences as if those who aided in capturing and sending to hopeless bondage a fellow-man were specially the friends of law and order, as if those who struggled against the execution of that inhuman law were characteristically disturbers of the public peace. Never was there a greater violation of truth. One could not walk the streets of Boston on Friday morning last, for half an hour, without being convinced that those crowds from which came the cries of shame, as the human sacrifice went on, were largely made up of those very classes on whom the social fabric rests as its supporting pillars, — the just, the humane, the self-governed, the industrious, the lovers of peace and of order. No more could a half-hour's observation leave a doubt, that those from whom disorders, social tumults, riots, and crimes mostly come were generally in active sympathy with those who

catch men. Of course, I have not meant that every man who has opposed the slave-catching is a good man, nor that every man is utterly vile who has consented to it. I have been characterizing classes.

But do you remind me, that all that was done was lawfully done? I have much to say on that point; and I shall speak, at another time, of the relations of the Christian citizen to the State, and particularly of his relations to a law that requires him, at least, to *permit* the catching, binding, and delivering over of his *neighbor*, charged with no crime, to scourgings, to unrequited labor, to all the indescribable horrors of that doom for which American slavery is the name.

We ought at least to hear no more apologies for slavery, no more suggestions, that, if we knew it better, our opposition to it would be mitigated. It has come among us, and made its character evident. It is our fault, if we do not know it by this time. But, mark you, my friends, we shall know it better yet, before we are done with it, or rather before it is done with us. It will show itself here again, doubtless. It will show itself, without coming again, in the ripening of those fruits of lawlessness and violence among us of which it has sown the seeds, and whose budding forth is already taking place. Slavery is no worse now than it was ten months ago, before Nebraska bills were passed, and fugitive-slave bills were revived: it is the same thing, only a little better known. Late events have not changed it: they have

only partially exposed it. In this view of things, the events of the last week are not to be regretted. A known and seen danger is always less dangerous than a concealed one. Slavery is more likely to be judged aright, and treated aright, for having come among us and exhibited itself. God has made us see to what enormities we have been parties, in so far as we have suffered this government to go on its course of oppression without gainsaying or opposition. The truth to be remarked, to be treasured up, not to be forgotten, is, that we have seen in Boston, the last week, *not all* of slavery, not *much* of it, but only a *sample* of it, as far as it goes; a single illustration of its merciless spirit, of its cruel law. There you have seen what slavery is. There you see its essential nature. It is not always and everywhere so bad. But here it has done nothing contrary to its inherent spirit. Wherever and whenever it is better than we have seen it in this case, it is better because they who use it are better than *it* is, just as men who belong to a religious or a political party, or to any other organized society, may be better than their principles of organization. We have seen here, not the abuses of slavery, but slavery. Nobody pretends that these slave-hunters have done worse than is consistent with the law of slavery. They have not. They have exhibited slavery in its own true colors. If we cannot yet see what those colors are, we probably never shall.

In what I have been saying, I have not forgotten

where we are, nor lost sight of those elements with which the table before me is spread. We are here as Christians. As believers in the Son of God and his followers, we are soon to commemorate his love of man, stronger than his love of life. Have the words which have been spoken seemed inharmonious with those feelings which become Christian communion? If so, I have either mislearned Christ, or mistaught him. It is from Christ that I have learned to prefer mercy to sacrifice. From him I have learned to believe in God as no respecter of persons, — to believe that he is our Father, and that the meaning of “our” is *all*-embracing, knowing nothing of master or servant, of rich or poor, of black or white, of African or Saxon.

From him I learn the golden rule, to do to another what it is right for me to ask another to do to me. From him I learn that love, love to God and the neighbor, fulfils the law. I hear him say, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” Does any one believe, that, if there had been a spirit as pure and holy as that of Jesus of Nazareth in that man of sable cheek whom Massachusetts men marched from Boston Court House to the United States slave-ship, it would have altered the matter one grain? No. Everybody knows it would not. We know that slavery comes as near to buying and selling Christ as it is possible for it to do; for it buys and sells his

disciples ; and the more saintly their virtue, the higher price they bring in the market. The more of the divine Master's image there is in them, the more highly prized are they by these traders in the children of God. That Christian forbearance which in a servant makes him gentle and submissive, has a place in the list of prices-current in each man-buying and man-selling community.

But Jesus did not say, that to treat the purest and best of his disciples with neglect and cruelty was the same as treating him so. He said, " Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of the least, — not the greatest, but the *least*, — of these my brethren, ye did it not to me." In the eye of Christ, in the eye of God, in the eye of every one born of God and following Christ, the treatment which Anthony Burns received in this, which calls itself a *Christian* community, is no better, no worse, than if it had been shown to Jesus himself. Indeed, that treatment, precisely that treatment, would Jesus have received, had he lived now, had he been the son of a Virginian bond-woman, and had he dared to travel away from Virginian captivity. Were Jesus alive now, and of African complexion, he could not walk a mile beyond the boundary-line of a Slave State without the liability of being hauled to prison, and sold thence into a life-long bondage.

I have but begun to say what it is in my heart to say. But I have spoken longer than I purposed when I began. I have only to remind you, in finish-

ing these remarks, and in view of that communion-rite before us, in which we are to recall the sacrifice of the cross, that it is not they who cry *Lord, Lord*, not those who shall say, "We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, or thou hast taught in our streets," whom God will recognize as his children, or whom Jesus will know as his disciples.

If any one thinks, that, in the sufferings of Jesus alone, we should have found a fitter theme for the meditations of this hour, I can only repeat the words of Jesus himself, addressed to the daughters of Jerusalem, as he went on that sorrowful march to the cross, — "WEEP NOT FOR ME, BUT WEEP FOR YOURSELVES, AND FOR YOUR CHILDREN."





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